

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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The man who would "cast beyond the moon" might well be the undoing of the prognosticators.

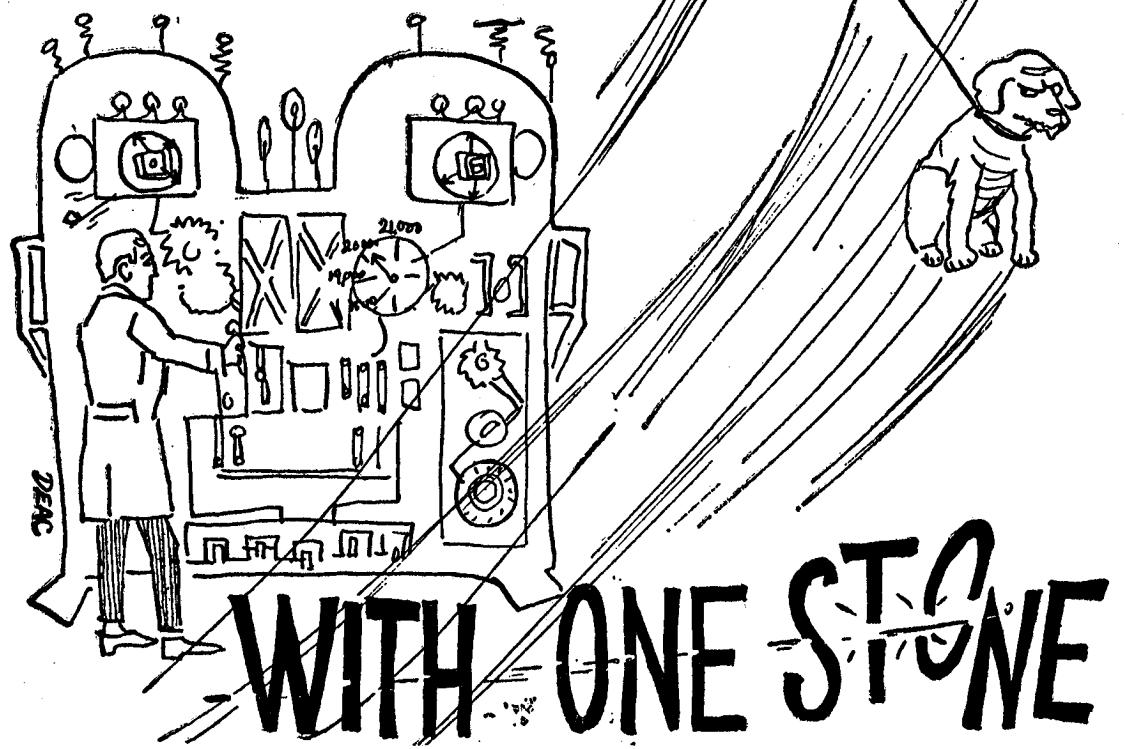
AND SO you saved the entire human race from extinction?" Professor Layton asked.

"Yes," I said. "Indirectly."

Professor Layton was a skeptic. "This is quite an impressive aggregation of machinery you have here. I suppose you call it your Time Machine and it leaps into the future?"

"No," I said, "the machine stays here. It is an *object* which I send into the future, and I am able to transport it to any portion of this

by Jack
Ritchie



earth at the press of a button."

To tell the truth, I have never really liked Professor Layton, though I have admired his incisive mind, his erudition. For an academic man, he is a person with a remarkably commanding personality.

"So the future is immutable?" he asked. "It cannot be changed?"

"I don't quite understand all aspects of that myself," I said, "but basically that appears to be true."

My first experiments had been with the common objects about me. Initially I had put a volume, *The Mill on the Floss*, in the center of my transference circle—I felt that in case something went wrong, I could easily spare it—and proceeded to project it two hundred years into the future.

When I brought it back to the present five minutes later, it was a bit wet. Evidently it had been raining.

I next tried lamps, tables, chairs, and other objects with complete success.

Ultimately I progressed to animate subjects—a bowl of goldfish, my parakeet, and eventually I borrowed a friend's dog.

I remember tethering the animal to one of the legs of my heavy green armchair. I did not want him to wander off into another century and become irretrievably

lost. It could prove embarrassing.

I sent him boldly off to the year 20,000 and when I brought him back ten minutes later, he seemed none the worse for wear and even yawned a bit.

According to my calculations I had transferred him 20,000 years into the future, but how did I really *know* that he had been there?

So, inevitably I found myself sitting in the chair and staring at the small portable control mechanism in the palm of my hand. How far ahead should I set the dial? A thousand years? Or should I approach this with caution and try for ten years? Twenty?

I remember finally smiling. It probably made no difference. Might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb and 20,000 years seemed a good journey.

I pressed the button.

Now Professor Layton lit a cigar. "And what kind of a world did you find?"

"Rather green," I said. "Quite overgrown. You see—as I learned later—it had been some 14,000 years since it happened and there had been an almost complete recovery. Of the vegetation, at least."

"Since *what* happened?"

"The atomic wars, and hydrogen, and cobalt, and all those things."

Professor Layton snorted. "I

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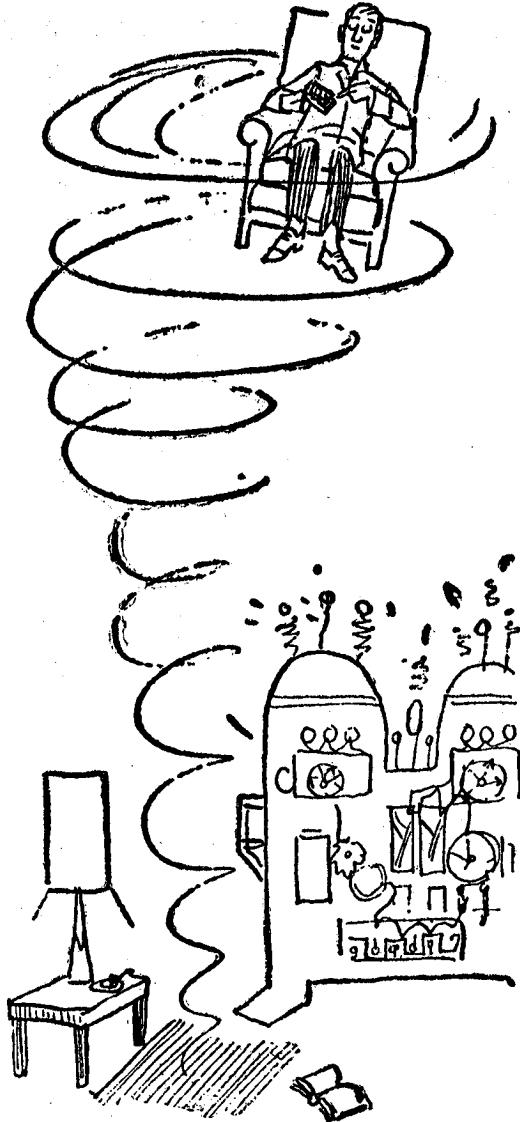
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might have expected to hear that. So there had been a complete recovery as far as the vegetation went? What about the people? There *were* people? Or weren't there?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "There were people."

"Mutations? Or something of that nature?"

"No. The people looked very much like we look today, except

WITH ONE STONE

that they were rapidly dying out."

"Radiation? Contaminated atmosphere?"

"No. As I mentioned before, that had all passed. The air was quite pure and healthy. No, the change was within them. Their minds?"

"What was wrong with their minds?"

I smiled rather apologetically. "Well, it was almost as though the human race had become tired of it all and decided that it would cease to exist. I transported myself to a dozen different places on the face of the earth and the situation seemed to be identical wherever I went. I would estimate that the population of the entire earth had declined to less than one hundred thousand."

Layton ran fingers through his hair. "And you communicated with them? I suppose they all spoke English?"

"No. As a matter of fact, their languages seemed to have regressed to hardly more than gutturals. But I could *see* that the intelligence was still there. It was only that their *will* to live—to learn, to survive—seemed to have left them."

Layton waved an angry finger. "And you claim that you . . . *you* managed to . . ." He pulled himself together. "How much time

did you spend there altogether?"

"One week. It was all rather interesting and I did feel a bit like a tourist."

"One week?" He showed teeth. "And I suppose you encountered some sort of space-time warp? One week of time in the future is but a moment of the present?"

"No," I said. "Actually the time exchange rate was one for one, so to speak. One hour of our present is equal to one hour of the future—one year, one year—one lifetime, one lifetime." I sighed. "You have no idea what just my appearance among them meant. I seemed to be a catalyst. I became their leader immediately—by default, I imagine—but as long as I gave them direction they would do anything I wanted, including just living. Frankly, it all rather embarrassed me."

Layton seemed to bite on his cigar. "How far into the future did you say this machine could take you?"

"Twenty-one thousand years," I said. "That seems to be the limit."

"And so you traveled 20,000 years

into the future and found that the human race was on the verge of extinction?"

"Yes."

"And naturally this worried you?"

"Well, yes."

He showed teeth again. "In that case, instead of worrying, why didn't you immediately take your time machine *another* thousand years into the future and see for yourself whether the human race was or was not saved?"

"I did."

There was a silence while he studied me suspiciously. "And? It was saved?"

I nodded. "Yes. Things turned out quite nicely."

He took a deep breath. "In that *one* week you managed to—"

"Good Heavens, no," I said. "Saving the human race took a lifetime."

"And *you* did it?"

"No."

He frowned and sat up a bit in the green chair. "Then who did?"

"You," I said, and pressed the button.

